



## Corresponding across Religious Borders: Al-Bājī's Response to a Missionary Letter from France

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### Abstract

"I have examined, O monk, the letter coming from you, the friendship therein proffered, the advice which you offer, and the intention which you disclose." With these words begins the reply written by the eminent Andalusian Mālikī scholar Abū l-Walīd Sulaymān al-Bājī (d. 1081) to a letter received at the Muslim court of Saragossa from an unidentified 'monk of France' inviting the ruler to convert to Christianity. This letter, if authentic, is the earliest extant record of a Christian mission to Muslims in the West. After introducing al-Bājī and situating him in the socio-political and religious circumstances of the time, this article offers a review of past scholarship relating to this correspondence, which has mostly focused on the authenticity of the Christian letter and the possible identification of its author. It is argued in favor of the authenticity of the exchange, offering reasons for it. The article then turns to al-Bājī's text, seeking to draw from it what it can tell us about him and how he viewed Christians and Christianity.

### Keywords

Al-Andalus, Christian-Muslim relations, conversion, Christian mission, Convivencia, polemics

"I have examined, O monk, the letter coming from you, the friendship therein proffered, the advice which you offer, and the intention which you disclose." With these words begins the reply written by the eminent Andalusian Mālikī scholar Abū l-Walīd Sulaymān al-Bājī (d. 1081) to a letter received at the Muslim court of Saragossa from an unidentified 'monk of France' (*rāhib min Ifransa*) inviting the ruler, al-Muqtadir Ibn Hūd, to convert to Christianity. This letter, if authentic, is the earliest extant record of a Christian mission to Muslims in the West. That fact

alone makes this epistolary exchange worthy of attention.<sup>1</sup> In addition, al-Bājī's response, together with the polemical writings of his contemporary, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), constitute the first examples of Muslim anti-Christian polemics in al-Andalus, clearly an indication of the important changes that were beginning to take place in the power relationship between the two communities during the eleventh century.

This article begins by introducing al-Bājī and situating him in the socio-political and religious circumstances of the time, the period of the so-called *mulūk al-ṭawā'if* or kings of the petty states. I then offer a review of past scholarship relating to this correspondence, which has mostly focused on the authenticity of the Christian letter and the possible identification of its author. I argue in favor of the authenticity of the exchange, offering my reasons for it. Finally, I turn to the text, seeking to draw from it what it can tell us about al-Bājī and how he viewed Christians and Christianity. It is my hope that by focusing on how particular individuals reacted to the challenge of religious pluralism—in our case, an explicit invitation to convert—we might further refine our understanding of what has come to be known as the Iberian *convivencia*.<sup>2</sup>

### One of the Most Eminent Men in Spain

In his famous biographical dictionary, Iraqi scholar Ibn Khallikān (d. 1282) refers to Abū l-Walīd Sulaymān ibn Khalaf ibn Sa'd ibn Ayyūb ibn Wārith al-Tujībī al-Andalusī al-Bājī as "one of the most eminent men in Spain," and not without reason, for al-Bājī, together with his well-known nemesis, Ibn Ḥazm of Cordoba, were undoubtedly the two most important literary figures in eleventh-century al-Andalus.<sup>3</sup> Al-Bājī was

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, both the Christian missive and al-Bājī's reply mention a previous epistolary exchange between the same correspondents, an exchange of which, however, no record has survived. Unsatisfied with the reply of the Muslim ruler to his first letter, the 'monk of France' decided to write a second time.

<sup>2</sup> On the merits of an approach to the study of the *convivencia* that focuses on individuals rather than on religious or ethnic groups, see Jonathan Ray, "Beyond Tolerance and Persecution: Reassessing Our Approach to Medieval *Convivencia*," *Jewish Social Studies* 11 (2005), 1-18. See also Kenneth B. Wolf, "Convivencia in Medieval Spain: A Brief History of an Idea," *Religion Compass* 3 (2008), 72-85.

<sup>3</sup> William Mac Guckin de Slane, trans., *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary*, 4 vols (Paris: Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1842-1871), 1:593. See also the portrait of al-Bājī written by his celebrated disciple, al-Qāḍī Abū l-Faḍl 'Iyāḍ (d. 1149),

born on 28 May 1013 into a humble family from Badajoz which had emigrated to Beja, today in Portugal.<sup>4</sup> When he was about 23 years old, having received his first training in Cordoba, where his family had finally settled, al-Bājī travelled to the East in pursuit of further education in the Islamic sciences. He spent three years at Mecca where he studied jurisprudence and *ḥadīth* (the traditions of the prophet Muḥammad) under the Mālikī scholar Abū Dharr al-Harawī (d. 1042/3). The latter was a disciple of Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), the author of *al-Tamhīd*, one of the earliest extant examples of a complete manual of *kalām* (Islamic dialectical theology).<sup>5</sup> From Mecca, al-Bājī went to Baghdad where he continued his study of jurisprudence and *ḥadīth* under various masters, such as the prominent Shāfiʿī scholars Abū l-Ṭayyib al-Ṭabarī (d. 1058) and Abū Ishāq al-Shīrāzī (d. 1083), the latter the main disciple of al-Bāqillānī. Al-Bājī spent a further year in Mosul studying under the Ashʿarī theologian Abū Jaʿfar al-Simnānī (d. 1052). According to one account, he devoted this year to acquainting himself with the relatively new science of *kalām*. Al-Bājī is also said to have visited Aleppo and Damascus, as well as Egypt, during his stay of almost 13 years in the East. He returned to his native land around 1047 and occupied various positions, his reputation as a scholar growing at a fast pace. Proof of this recognition is the fact that, soon after his return, he was called to dispute in Majorca with Ibn Ḥazm, a dispute al-Bājī won and which led to the expulsion of the Cordoban theologian from Majorca in or around 1048.<sup>6</sup>

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in Juan Castilla Brazales, "Dos célebres maestros mālikíes del siglo XI," *Al-Andalus-Magreb* 7 (1999), 67-77.

<sup>4</sup> The sources are not in accord, however, on whether al-Bājī was born in Badajoz or in Beja. The question is discussed in José D. Garcia Domingues, "A obra jurídica e teológica de Abu'l-Walid al-Baji (o de Beja)," *Occidente* 59 (1960), 37-38, who inclines to the second opinion. For the opposite view, see Jacinto Bosch Vilá, "A propósito de una misión cristiana a la corte de Al-Muqtadir Ibn Hūd," *Tamuda* 2 (1954), 103.

<sup>5</sup> On this author, his work *al-Tamhīd*, and the important refutation of Christianity contained therein, see David Thomas, *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 119-141. As we shall see later, al-Bājī boasts about his knowledge of the different Christian sects and his aptitude for theological reasoning and dialectical argumentation, which he clearly sees to be lacking in his Christian interlocutor.

<sup>6</sup> The contending parties in the dispute, which had to do with juridical and theological issues, were the Mālikī jurists of Majorca on the one side, and Ibn Ḥazm, representing the Zāhiri school, on the other. The classical study of this dispute is that of Abdelmagid Turki, *Polémiques entre Ibn Hazm et Bāġī sur les principes de la loi musulmane: essai sur le littéralisme*

Ibn Khallikān notes in his obituary that al-Bājī lived in the eastern part of the peninsula. In effect, his biographers mention his time spent in places such as Murcia, Denia, Orihuela, Valencia and Lérida. He prospered financially and is known to have had contacts with sundry Muslim rulers. Al-Bājī seems to have been concerned by the prevailing antagonism between the various *taifa* kings who had come into power after the collapse of Umayyad rule in 1031, and sought to promote unity and peace among them. José García Domingues points out that, unlike Ibn Ḥazm, al-Bājī was not looking forward to the restoration of the Umayyads, but rather to a new type of moral and religious unity of the Muslim rulers in order to confront the expansionist policies of the northern Christian kingdoms.<sup>7</sup> His views found favor among the Banū Hūd, the ruling dynasty of Saragossa, in northeast Iberia, where he was called by Abū Jaʿfar Aḥmad ibn Sulaymān ibn Hūd al-Muqtadir bi-llāh (reigned 1049-1082) sometime after the recovery of Barbastro by Muslim forces in April 1065.<sup>8</sup> Al-Bājī's stay in the capital of the Ebro Valley lasted several years and it is here that he produced most of his literary output.<sup>9</sup> He died in Almeria on 21 December 1081, at the age of 68 (70 by Muslim reckoning).

Among al-Bājī's extensive writings, Ibn Khallikān points out three in particular: (1) *Kitāb al-muntaqā*, an abridged version of his commentary on the famous *Muwattaʿa* of Mālik ibn Anas (d. 795), the eponym of the Mālikī school; (2) *Iḥkām al-fuṣūl fī aḥkām al-uṣūl*, on juridical theory; and (3) *al-Taʿdīl wa-l-tajrīḥ li-man kharraja ʿanhu al-Bukhārī fī al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, on

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*zahirite et la finalité malikite* (Algiers: Société nationale d'Édition et de Diffusion, 1975). See also García Domingues, "A obra," 41-44.

<sup>7</sup> García Domingues, "A obra," 40-41. Interestingly, according to the witness of al-Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ, al-Bājī would have advocated the unity of the *taifa* kings under the aegis of the nascent Almoravid movement, still in Morocco. See Hanna E. Kassis, "Muslim Revival in Spain in the Fifth/Eleventh Century: Causes and Ramifications," *Der Islam* 67 (1990), 91, n. 46.

<sup>8</sup> Bosch Vilá, "A propósito," 104. On the Banū Hūd rule of the *taifa* of Saragossa, see María Jesús Viguera Molíns, *Aragón musulmán* (Zaragoza: Mira Editores, 1988), 185-224. The reign of al-Muqtadir is described in 188-206. See also Brian A. Catlos, *The Victors and the Vanquished: Christians and Muslims of Catalonia and Aragon, 1050-1300* (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19-120: Muslim Domination of the Ebro and its Demise.

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of al-Bājī's intellectual career in Saragossa including that of his most important disciples, Abū Bakr al-Ṭurtūshī (d. 1126) and Abū ʿAlī al-Ṣadafī ibn Sukkara (d. 1120), see George T. Beech, *The Brief Eminence and Doomed Fall of Islamic Saragossa: A Great Center of Jewish and Arabic Learning in the Iberian Peninsula during the 11th Century* (Zaragoza: Instituto de Estudios Islámicos y del Oriente Próximo, 2008), 108-110.

the transmitters of *ḥadīth*.<sup>10</sup> Also important are his *Risāla fī al-ḥudūd*, on methodological questions in jurisprudence and *ḥadīth*, and *al-Minhāj fī tartīb al-ḥijāj*, apparently the first work on the science of disputation in the field of jurisprudence composed in the Muslim West.<sup>11</sup> As for the reply to the 'Letter of the Monk of France,' although Carl Brockelmann lists it among al-Bājī's works,<sup>12</sup> it is not mentioned in the Arabic bio-bibliographical sources. This is not totally uncommon, however, for these sources usually refer to the most significant works of the authors under consideration. Abdelmagid Turki, who has edited several of al-Bājī's works,<sup>13</sup> discerns a common character and turn of mind between this and other undisputed works of al-Bājī, which strongly suggests that he was indeed the author of the reply to the 'Letter of the Monk of France,' as attested in the manuscript.<sup>14</sup>

### The Politico-Religious Situation in Islamic Iberia at the Time of al-Bājī

The eleventh century was a momentous time in the history of al-Andalus.<sup>15</sup> At the death of the Umayyad Caliph al-Ḥakam II al-Muntaṣir in 976, his

<sup>10</sup> *Ibn Khallikan*, 1:593. A more complete bibliography is found in Francisco Vidal Castro, "al-Bājī, Abū l-Walid," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, eds Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Everett Rowson (Leiden: Brill, 2011), available online at: [http://0-www.brillonline.nl.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=eī3\\_COM-24281](http://0-www.brillonline.nl.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=eī3_COM-24281). See also Maribel Fierro, "Abū l-Walid al-Bayī," *Diccionario de autores y obras andalusíes, tomo I (A-Ibn B)*, eds. J. Lirola Delgado and J.M. Puerta Vilchez (Seville: Consejería de Cultura de la Junta de Andalucía/Granada: Fundación El Legado Andalusí, 2002), 121-123.

<sup>11</sup> Maribel Fierro, "La religión," in *Los reinos de taifas: Al-Andalus en el siglo XI*, ed. M.J. Viguera Molíns (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1994), 412. Al-Bājī's initiation to this new discipline may well have taken place in Baghdad under the guidance of the above-mentioned al-Shīrāzī, an acknowledged master in the realm of juridical controversy.

<sup>12</sup> Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, 2nd edn (Leiden: Brill, 1943), 1:534.

<sup>13</sup> Abū l-Walid al-Bājī, *Al-minhāj fī tartīb al-ḥijāj, L'art de la polémique*, ed. A. Turki (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1978); idem, *Iḥkām al-ḥuṣūl fī aḥkām al-uṣūl*, ed. A. Turki (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Abdelmagid Turki, "Lettre du 'Moine de France' à al-Muqtadir billāh, roi de Saragosse, et la réponse d'al-Bāyī, le faqih andalou," *Al-Andalus* 31 (1966), 82-83.

<sup>15</sup> For this section, particularly in regard to the religious situation, I draw extensively on Maribel Fierro's contribution to *Los reinos de taifas: Al-Andalus en el siglo XI*. See also, by the same author, "Proto-Maliki, Maliki, and Reformed Maliki in al-Andalus," in *The*

son and successor was only a child. Ibn Abī ‘Āmir al-Ma‘āfirī, known as al-Manṣūr bi-llāh (the Almanzor of the Christian chronicles), seized the occasion to establish a dynasty of powerful chief ministers while the caliphate continued in the hands of weaker candidates. The ‘Āmirid control of the situation did not last long, however. The death of al-Manṣūr’s son and successor, ‘Abd al-Malik al-Muẓaffar, in 1008—of which the main suspect was his own brother—initiated a turbulent period of *fitna* or civil war that ended in the dissolution of the Caliphate in 1031, thus giving way to the period of political fragmentation known as the age of the *taifa* kings. Mari-bel Fierro notes that the absence of a caliph did not seem to worry the Andalusian scholars much until decades later, when the Christian threat became manifest with the fall of Barbastro and Coimbra in 1064, Coria in 1079, and, above all, Toledo in 1085. In fact, as she points out, the lack of a central politico-religious head in al-Andalus was somehow compensated for by the existence of a cohesive group of Mālikī scholars, for the political disintegration of the Caliphate did not result in a similar breakdown at the religious level. Mālikism, which the Umayyads had adopted as the official juridical school of al-Andalus, continued to prevail among Andalusian Muslims, notwithstanding the presence of other juridical schools and of variations and disputes within Mālikism itself.

The perpetuation of Mālikī dominance after the political fragmentation of al-Andalus does not mean, however, that the eleventh-century religious situation in Islamic Iberia was without defining characteristics. Fierro points out three important details in this sense. First, the Mālikism of this century was not exactly the same as that of previous times. During the eleventh century, and thanks precisely to the work of jurists such as al-Bājī and Abū ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (d. 1071),<sup>16</sup> the process of adoption into Mālikism of the juridical theory formulated by Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 820) in his seminal legal treatise, *al-Risāla*, came to completion. We also witness during this time the introduction of Ash‘arī influences

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*Islamic School of Law: Evolution, Devolution, and Progress*, ed. P. Bearman, et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 57-76; Dominique Urvoy, “The ‘Ulamā’ of al-Andalus,” in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. S.K. Jayyusi (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 849-877; David Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings: Politics and Society in Islamic Spain 1002-1086* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); and Peter Scales, *The Fall of the Caliphate of Córdoba: Berbers and Andalus in Conflict* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> On this Mālikī scholar, see Castilla Brazales, “Dos célebres,” 77-81.

in the theological reflection of Andalusian Mālikī scholars, of which al-Bājī is again a case in point.<sup>17</sup>

Second, we can also detect an evolution in the field of religiosity, an evolution marked above all by the growing veneration of the Prophet, whose figure becomes increasingly the model of conduct for mystics and ascetics. Connected with it was the polemic about the capacity of saintly figures to perform miracles, which some considered an exclusive prophetic privilege.<sup>18</sup> A further characteristic of the religiosity of the times noted by Fierro is the emphasis on the duty of *jihād*, both spiritual and physical, particularly during the second half of the century. Also ascribable to the atmosphere of crisis is the emergence in this period of figures who were deeply concerned about the decline of religious and moral standards in Andalusian society and who sought to raise them. These individuals did not hesitate to have recourse to the populace to put an end to what they saw as blameworthy innovations and pernicious behavior, although accusations of heresy that ended in formal processes do not seem to have abounded. In fact, al-Bājī's reply to the 'Letter of the Monk of France' appears to share much of this concern for the religious situation of his coreligionists, a concern that he expressed on multiple occasions.<sup>19</sup>

A third important characteristic of the religious situation of al-Andalus in the period of the *taifas* is the increased intellectual complexity that can be observed in comparison to previous centuries, a phenomenon that manifests itself above all in the rise of religious polemics. "This was a century in which everything was open to debate, beginning with the existence of God and the veracity of the revealed religions."<sup>20</sup> Debate took place

<sup>17</sup> See Vincent Lagardère, "Une théologie dogmatique de la frontière en al-Andalus aux XI<sup>e</sup> et XII<sup>e</sup> siècles: l'aš'arisme," *Anaquel de estudios árabes* 5 (1994), 82-90.

<sup>18</sup> Fierro, "La religión," 423-425.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, Fierro mentions al-Bājī's recommendations to his children in his 'Testament' (*Waṣiyya li waladayhi*), exhorting them to moral uprightness and warning them against having recourse to astrology, wine drinking, playing chess and singing. Kassis translates an extract of this work in which the Andalusian scholar admonishes his children to remain devoted and attached to this religion which God, be He exalted, has given us of His bounty. Let none of the affairs of this world cause you to slide away from it. Offer even your lives in return for it and sacrifice for it all worldly things. Without it, expect eternal Hell, and with it, the hope of eternal bliss... If you die maintaining this faith, which God has selected and preferred—while He has forbidden all other religions—then I hope that we shall meet where we shall neither fear separation nor anticipate an ending. God well knows how I yearn for this. (Kassis, "Muslim Revival," 93)

<sup>20</sup> Fierro, "La religión," 495. Hereafter, all translations into English are mine.

among Muslims, but also with Christians and Jews. One of the ideas that seems to have found some support, particularly among Jewish thinkers, was the so-called “equivalence of [contradictory] proofs” (*takāfu’ al-adilla*), a philosophical skepticism about the possibility of proving religious truth.<sup>21</sup> This atmosphere of open debate corresponds, however, to the first half of the eleventh century. Christian territorial advances in the second half of the century will change the situation in many ways, by intensifying the phenomenon of conversion to Christianity and by creating a new situation not yet envisaged in Islamic jurisprudence, namely, Muslims living under non-Muslim rule, the *mudéjares*. Furthermore, as we shall see later, the last quarter of the eleventh century saw the first stirrings of a Christian mission to the Muslims, which will emerge with full force only in the 13th century with the arrival on scene of the Mendicant Orders.

For Fierro, the point of inflexion in the attitudes of Iberian Muslims was the capture of Barbastro by an international coalition of Christian forces early in 1065, even if the city was recovered shortly afterwards.<sup>22</sup> This event had important effects on interreligious relations in al-Andalus,

<sup>21</sup> See Moshe Perlmann, “Ibn Ḥazm on the Equivalence of Proofs,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 40 (1949-1950), 279-290.

<sup>22</sup> On this expedition against Barbastro, which Ramón Menéndez Pidal famously described as “a crusade before the crusades,” see Joseph F. O’Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 24-7; Beech, *The Brief Eminence*, 231-233; and more in detail Philippe Sénac, “Un château en Espagne: Notes sur la prise de Barbastro (1064),” in *Liber Largitorius. Etudes d’histoire médiévale offertes à Pierre Toubert par ses élèves*, eds D. Barthélemy and J.-M. Martin (Geneva: Droz, 2003), 545-562. For echoes of the fall of Barbastro in Muslim sources, see Manuela Marín, “Crusaders in the Muslim West: The View of Arab Writers,” *The Maghreb Review* 17 (1992), 95-102. According to her analysis, the fall of Barbastro differs from other narratives of sieges and loss of territory. Several Arab writers express their horror and consternation at this event. They are aware that the attackers came from beyond the Pyrenees and describe them as treacherous, ferocious, and thirsty for booty. Among the witnesses collected, we find the following fragment by Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr describing the situation after the fall of Barbastro:

What can be your opinion, O Muslims, when you see mosques and oratories, that once were witness to the recitation of the Qur’ān and the sweetness of the call to prayer, immersed in polytheism and slander, loaded with bells and crosses in place of the followers of the Merciful: imāms and pious men, vergers and muezzins...are dragged away by the infidels like animals for sacrifice, they are brought to the butcher, they prostrate themselves humbly in the mosques which are then burnt and reduced to ashes while the infidels laugh and insult us, and our religion wails and weeps. (96, modified)



such as a growing insistence on the stricter application of the classical Islamic regulations concerning the presence of religious minorities in Muslim lands and the appearance of works of theological polemics. According to Fierro, it is from this perspective that we best understand al-Bāji's purpose in writing his response to the 'Letter of the Monk of France.'<sup>23</sup> Another important effect of the fall of Barbastro was a lessening effect in the tolerance of diversity and a tendency towards religious uniformity within the Spanish Muslim community itself.

Fierro's analysis can be supplemented by the views of Hanna Kassis, who has also devoted considerable attention to the socio-religious situation of al-Andalus during this period.<sup>24</sup> For this author, the events that took place in the eleventh century and during the first decades of the following century radically affected the history of Muslim-Christian relations, causing the "accelerated polarization" of the two religious communities. This process was the result of three major factors: (1) the straitened circumstances of Andalusian Muslims, which generated a sense of displacement and isolation among them; (2) the attraction of some Muslims to Christianity; and (3) the Muslim revival under the Almoravids following the defeat of the Christian forces of Alfonso VI of Castile at the Battle of Zallāca (Sagrajas, north of Badajoz) on 23 October 1086, which put a temporary halt to Christian territorial advance.<sup>25</sup>

Jurists and *littérateurs* deplored the divisiveness of the *taifa* kings and their readiness to seek the help of Christian lords in their struggles against each other, in addition to their moral failures and unorthodox lifestyle, as the main cause of the enfeeblement of the Islamic community in al-Andalus and its military humiliation. Another element that played an important role in the general sense of decadence was, according to Kassis, the

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<sup>23</sup> Fierro thinks that the French missive was probably a fiction. I will argue later that we do not need to posit a fictitious origin of the letter—in fact, internal evidence exists that points to the authenticity of the exchange—to retain her view that al-Bāji's main purpose was to strengthen the Islamic community in the face of the crisis of confidence caused by Christian military success.

<sup>24</sup> In addition to the already quoted "Muslim Revival," see also his articles: "Arabic-speaking Christians in al-Andalus in an Age of Turmoil (Fifth/Eleventh century until A.H. 478/A.D. 1085," *Al-Qantara* 15 (1994), 401-422; and "Some Aspects of the Legal Position of Christians under Mālikī Jurisprudence in Al-Andalus," *Parole de l'Orient* 24 (1999), 113-128.

<sup>25</sup> Kassis, "Muslim Revival," 78.

escalating divisive ethnicity of the Islamic community.<sup>26</sup> All this contributed to a weakening of the fabric of Muslim society in eleventh-century Iberia and the development of a *frontier* mentality, that is to say, “a feeling of being a dominating stranger in a foreign land and in an alien milieu.”<sup>27</sup>

The second determining factor in the increasing polarization of the two communities during this time was the fear of apostasy through conversion to Christianity. Contacts on the occasion of Christian celebrations or the attraction that some Muslim men felt toward Christian women were increasingly discouraged as the frontier mentality spread and Andalusian Muslims adopted a more conservative religious outlook.<sup>28</sup> This orthodox reaction was also linked to the perceived threat of organized Christian missionary activity directed towards the Muslims in Iberia, which Kassis explicitly associates with Cluny:

The ‘rediscovery’ of Spain by Latin Christendom—notably the Cluniacs—led to the explicit purpose of bringing the Peninsula in its entirety [in]to fold of Rome, religiously and politically . . . But while reform was its primary goal, Cluniac involvement [in Spain] included a desire to bring the Muslims of the Peninsula to “salvation” through conversion to Christianity. Thus, though to a limited degree, they extended their missionary activity among the Muslims as well.<sup>29</sup>

For Kassis, there is no doubt that this Cluniac missionary desire constitutes the historical background of the letter which was sent to Saragossa and to which al-Bāji replied. It is debatable whether we can affirm as categorically as he does the existence of a Cluniac mission intended to bring the whole of the Iberian Peninsula, Muslims included, into the Roman fold.<sup>30</sup> Still, his remark that al-Bāji’s concern “arose less from his desire to convert the monk than from his fear that his patron, Ibn Hūd, might

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 82. See also Fierro, “La religión,” 401.

<sup>27</sup> Kassis, “Muslim Revival,” 83.

<sup>28</sup> It should be noted, however, that fears about the “corruption” of Islam through assimilation of non-Islamic beliefs and practices, as well as concern for the isolation of the Muslim community of al-Andalus, had been raised by Andalusian religious scholars long before the eleventh century, as shown by Janina M. Safran in “Identity and Differentiation in Ninth-Century al-Andalus,” *Speculum* 76 (2001), 573-598.

<sup>29</sup> Kassis, “Muslim Revival,” 89-90.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, the critical remarks of Dominique Iogna-Prat in *Order and Exclusion: Cluny and Christendom Face Heresy, Judaism, and Islam (1000-1150)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 323-329.

apostatize,”<sup>31</sup> with the correction offered by George Beech, corresponds to what we know about the concerns of some Muslim scholars during this age of uncertainty about the future of Islam in al-Andalus.<sup>32</sup>

Rather than the fall of Barbastro in 1064, Kassis stresses Alfonso's capture of Toledo in 1085 as decisive for the future of Muslim-Christian relations in Spain and, more generally, in the West.<sup>33</sup> At the time of the conquest of Toledo, the ancient Visigothic capital, Alfonso did not yet have a clear policy on what the status of the Muslim population in the reconquered territories would be. On this issue, Kassis emphasizes the influence of the king's French wife, Constance, and of Bernard de Sauveterre, the French Cluniac Abbot of Sahagún, who became the first Archbishop of the reestablished Primatial See of Toledo in October 1086. The “French” view stressed the ancestral Christian identity of the Iberian Peninsula, insisting that Islam was in borrowed land and therefore destined to give way to its legitimate occupants (a process symbolically expressed in the conversion of mosques into churches). Kassis associates this view with Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085), for whom the Peninsula was to be restored not only to Christian sovereignty, but also to the pastoral care of the papacy as land belonging to Saint Peter.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Kassis, “Muslim Revival,” 92.

<sup>32</sup> As Beech rightly notes (*The Brief Eminence*, 94-95), it is unthinkable that al-Muqtadir would have contemplated conversion to Christianity out of personal conviction. However, it is not impossible, given the dangerous game of shifting alliances among local Christian and Muslim powers in which he engaged, that he might have authorized the exchange of letters and messengers with Christians north of the Pyrenees with a view to establishing friendly relations with them. Catlos (*The Victors*, 73) reminds us that Aḥmad ibn Sulaymān ibn Hūd took the sobriquet al-Muqtadir, ‘the Powerful,’ after defeating his brother Yūsuf and that he was at various times during his reign under the protection of Christian lords. “The practice of dividing the family lands at the death of each ruler ensured a state of more or less continuous conflict within the clan, a situation which the Christian powers endeavored to exploit, resulting in a web of crisscrossing alliances between the Christian kingdoms and rival Hūdīd factions” (ibid., 13). See also Clay Stalls, *Possessing the Land: Aragon's Expansion into Islam's Ebro Frontier under Alfonso the Battler, 1104-1134* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 9-24.

<sup>33</sup> On the fall of Toledo, see Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *A History of Medieval Spain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 204-207.

<sup>34</sup> On the connection between Gregory VII and the Spanish re-conquest, see O'Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade*, 27-31; Herbert E.J. Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory VII, 1073-1085* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 468-480; and Tomaž Mastnak, “Epistolae et privilegia,” *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*. General Editor David

We turn now to the correspondence between the anonymous ‘monk of France’ and the Muslim ruler of Saragossa, and we ask in the first place where the Christian letter could have originated.

### The Mysterious ‘Monk of France’

The only manuscript evidence for this correspondence is found in the Escorial Ms. 538, fols 52v-62r (1383), which contains both a short letter that, according to the incipit, an anonymous ‘monk of France’ addressed to al-Muqtadir bi-llāh, Lord of Saragossa, and the much longer reply written on behalf of the latter by “the most upright *qāḍī*, Abū l-Walīd al-Bājī.”<sup>35</sup> In 1952, Douglas M. Dunlop published the first edition of the Arabic text together with an English translation.<sup>36</sup> A new edition of the text with a corresponding French translation was published by Abdelmagid Turki in 1966.<sup>37</sup> Dunlop’s introductory comments set the parameters for much of the ensuing discussion on this correspondence up to the present day. In them, he remarked that the epistolary exchange was a well-attested genre of Muslim-Christian polemic, and that, if authentic, this correspondence would be one of the first documented examples of relations between Islam and the West. More importantly, Dunlop referred to the French ‘crusades’ in northern Spain and the influence of the great Abbey of Cluny as the historical background within which such a Christian mission to convert the Muslim Lord of Saragossa was quite understandable. He pointed out that several references in the correspondence indicated that the “the

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Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2011), available online at: [http://0-www.brillonline.nl.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=CMR\\_COM-24931](http://0-www.brillonline.nl.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=CMR_COM-24931).

<sup>35</sup> Epalza claims to have found another manuscript of al-Bājī’s letter in Istanbul. He does not say, however, whether it also contains the French missive. See Mikel de Epalza, “Notes pour une histoire des polémiques anti-chrétiennes dans l’Occident musulman,” *Arabica* 18 (1971), 101, n. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Douglas M. Dunlop, “A Christian Mission to Muslim Spain in the 11th Century,” *Al-Andalus* 17 (1952), 259-310. Hereafter, I shall adopt Dunlop’s division of the text into paragraphs and give a revised version of his translation.

<sup>37</sup> Turki, “Lettre.” Turki’s edition differs in numerous points from Dunlop’s. This is, in fact, the reason that led him to publish his work, as he explains in n. 11. There are two more recent editions by Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh al-Sharqāwī, *Risālat rāhib Faransā ilā al-Muslimīn wa-jawāb al-Qāḍī Abī al-Walīd al-Bājī ‘alayhā* (Cairo: Dār al-Ṣaḥwa, 1406/1986); and by Maḥmūd Khayārī, “Risālat rāhib Faransā ilā al-Muqtadir bi-llāh al-Andalusī,” *Al-Tabyīn: Thaqāfiyya Ibdā’iyya* 27 (2007), 83-97.

humblest of the monks" (§1) was, if real, an ecclesiastic of high rank and that the tone of the letter sent to al-Muqtadir seemed to be "unmistakably that of Latin Christendom."<sup>38</sup> Dunlop further speculated that this ecclesiastic might have been helped in the redaction and/or translation of the letter by a native Arabic speaker converted to Christianity, perhaps a Cluniac monk connected with the Christian convert of Tunisian origin, Constantine the African (d. before 1098-1099), at the abbey of Monte Cassino.<sup>39</sup> Finally, concerning the authenticity of the correspondence, Dunlop thought that both the internal and external evidence argued in favor of it. He saw the monk's argument that Islam is the work of the Devil through the agency of Muḥammad as "thoroughly in the spirit of medieval Christianity."<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the dialectical superiority claimed by al-Bāḥi and his knowledge of the Bible in Arabic reflects what we know about the historical conditions of the time. As for the external evidence, the manuscript in question contains a number of what are known to be authentic, historical letters.

In fact, there are reasons to challenge Dunlop's internal evidence for the genuineness of the Christian missive sent to Saragossa. The argument that Islam was the result of the Devil's machinations was already attested in Iberian soil since the mid-ninth century.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, he does not notice

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<sup>38</sup> Dunlop, "A Christian Mission," 261. Indications of the position of authority enjoyed by the 'monk of France' are found in §§2, 8, 9, 15, 37, 39.

<sup>39</sup> On this key figure in the introduction of Arab medicine in Europe, see Danielle Jacquart, "Constantinus Africanus," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, eds Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Everett Rowson (Leiden: Brill, 2011), available online at: [http://0-www.brillonline.nl.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=ei3\\_COM-24414](http://0-www.brillonline.nl.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=ei3_COM-24414).

<sup>40</sup> Dunlop, "A Christian Mission," 262.

<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, John Tolan, "Istoria de Mahomet," *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*. General Editor David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2011), available online at: [http://0-www.brillonline.nl.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=CMR\\_COM-23720](http://0-www.brillonline.nl.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=CMR_COM-23720). English translation by Kenneth B. Wolf in *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, ed. by O.R. Constable (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 48-50. This is one of the earliest polemical treatments of Muḥammad in Latin, presenting him as a false prophet and precursor of the Antichrist: "The spirit of error appeared to him in the form of a vulture and, exhibiting a golden mouth, said it was the angel Gabriel and ordered Muḥammad to present himself among his people as a prophet" (48). See also the references given by Benjamin Z. Kedar in his *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches toward the Muslims* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 22, n. 48.

the Nestorian overtones of the letter when it describes the Incarnation in the following terms: “He is God, who has veiled Himself in our human form” (*fā-huwa al-ilāh alladhī ittakhadha ḥijāb<sup>m</sup> ‘alā ṣūratinā*) (§2). As Jean-Marie Gaudeul remarks, this would be strange coming from a Catholic.<sup>42</sup> So rather than reflecting “unmistakably” Latin Christendom, the ‘Letter of the Monk of France’ could well have been a fiction composed from arguments that al-Bāḥī heard from local Christians and/or during his stay in the East as a pretext to refute Christianity and assert the truth of Islam. I will suggest later that there is internal evidence in favor of the authenticity of the Christian letter, but not that advanced by Dunlop.

Most of the scholarly attention devoted to the correspondence since 1952 has focused on the identity of the anonymous ‘monk of France.’ For Jacinto Bosch Vilá, writing two years after the publication of Dunlop’s work, the importance of this correspondence lies in the fact that it testifies to the first explicitly missionary envoy sent from Christian Europe to Muslim Spain. Although we certainly know of previous diplomatic missions and cultural contacts,

none of these embassies, whether those sent from Europe beyond the Pyrenees or from Byzantium or those sent by the Christian kings of northern Spain, had a missionary character, an evangelizing purpose, such as that which, in the second half of the eleventh century, came to the court of the Muslim ruler of Saragossa.<sup>43</sup>

Bosch Vilá thought that the originator of the letter must have been an important ecclesiastic related to Cluny, and that the exchange showed that

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<sup>42</sup> Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d’Islamistica, 2000), 1:136, n. 39. Parallels and possible connections between Eastern Nestorian writings on Islam and Mozarabic views are discussed in Dominique Urvoý, “La pensée religieuse des mozarabes face à l’Islam,” *Traditio* 39 (1983), 419-432.

<sup>43</sup> Bosch Vilá, “A propósito,” 98. In his opinion, this exchange should be considered not only as being probably the first Western Christian mission to Muslims, but also “the first example of religious polemical literature between Christian Europe and the Muslim West” (99). It is not clear to me precisely what Bosch Vilá means by that last observation. If he is suggesting that the ‘Letter of the Monk of France’ was the first case of Christian anti-Islamic polemics in the West, then he is obviously mistaken. If, however, he means that the *exchange* between the anonymous monk and al-Bāḥī was the first such polemical exchange between Christian Europe and the Muslim West, then his observation could very well be accurate.

eleventh-century Andalusian Muslims were much more knowledgeable about Christianity than were European Christians about Islam, and better equipped for religious polemic. From what we know about al-Bājī's presence in Saragossa, Bosch Vilá tried to determine the years during which this correspondence might have taken place. He concluded that the second missive sent to al-Muqtadir and al-Bājī's reply must have occurred between 1070 and 1075, during the abbacy of Hugh of Cluny (1049-1109), who can easily be linked to the evangelizing interest shown by the 'Letter of the Monk of France.'

The identity of the 'monk of France' again became the subject of a study, this one published in 1963 by Allan Cutler who, apparently unaware of Bosch Vilá's work, arrived at similar conclusions.<sup>44</sup> Cutler points to Cluny's deep involvement with Spain dating from the beginning of the eleventh century. Given the fact that this involvement had to do with matters that concerned Arabic—the language of both Muslims and Mozarabs—he thinks it highly likely that Arabic was already being studied at Cluny in that century. He also mentions the presence of numerous Spanish Mozarabic monks at Cluny during the long abbacy of Odilo (994-1048), some of whom must have known Arabic, concluding that Cluny was the most probable origin of the two envoys sent to the Muslim court of Saragossa. As for the identity of the anonymous 'monk of France,' Cutler opts for Abbot Hugh of Cluny, adding however that the initiative might have come from Gregory VII. He also suggests that the first envoy sent to al-Muqtadir could have been Anastasius of Cluny (d. c. 1085), who is known to have been sent to Spain around 1074 by Abbot Hugh "to preach to the Saracens" (*ad praedicandum Sarracenis*), following the wishes of Pope Gregory.<sup>45</sup> According to Cutler, Anastasius' mission could have been conceived after the failure of the 'pre-crusade' of Count Ebolus of Roucy against Saragossa in 1073, a failure that led Gregory to conceive

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<sup>44</sup> Allan Cutler, "Who was the 'Monk of France' and when did he write? A note on D.M. Dunlop's 'A Christian Mission to Muslim Spain in the 11th Century'," *Al-Andalus* 28 (1963), 249-269.

<sup>45</sup> According to his biographer, Anastasius, while in Spain, offered to prove the truth of the Christian religion by undergoing an ordeal by fire, an offer which, however, was rejected. See Matthieu Arnoux, "Un Vénitien au Mont-Saint-Michel: Anastase, moine, ermite et confesseur († vers 1085)," *Médiévales* 28 (1995), 64-65. See also Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory*, 491; O'Callaghan, *A History*, 312; and Kedar, *Crusade*, 45.

the then radically new and radically bold idea of attempting to convert the chief Moslem ruler of northwest [*sic*] Spain, al-Muqtadir of Saragossa. The idea was now to attempt to facilitate the progress of the Spanish *Reconquista* by means of the pen and the word, inasmuch as the sword had temporarily failed.<sup>46</sup>

As for the second mission to the court of al-Muqtadir, the one that occasioned al-Bājī's reply, Cutler believes that it might possibly be dated around 1078, during a period when two expeditions, led by Hugh I, Duke of Burgundy, were undertaken against Saragossa, in 1076 and 1079. Finally, he concurs with Bosch Vilá in considering the missives sent to Saragossa as probably the first missionary letters of a Western Christian to a Muslim ruler.

James Waltz, who otherwise is highly critical of Cutler's attempt to prove the existence of early missions to Muslims prior to the Crusades, accepts nonetheless the identification of the unnamed 'monk of France' as Hugh of Cluny, as well as Cutler's connection of this epistolary exchange with

the real but ineffective conversionary effort undertaken by the Cluniac monk Anastasius in 1074 to the same ruler and the contemporary *reconquista* campaigns in a supposed alternation of attempts at conversion by pen and by sword. Here indeed it is proper to speak of a Christian missionary, if not a Christian mission to the Muslims.<sup>47</sup>

Generally speaking, subsequent scholars who have referred to the epistolary exchange between the 'monk of France' and al-Bājī have tended to accept the historical authenticity of the correspondence and Bosch Vilá's

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<sup>46</sup> Cutler, "Who was the 'Monk of France'," 263. Elsewhere Cutler conjectures that Anastasius's attempt to convert al-Muqtadir might have inspired Peter the Hermit's idea to convert Kerbogha, the Turkish military ruler of Mosul who besieged the crusaders at Antioch in June 1098 (see Allan Cutler, "The First Crusade and the Idea of Conversion," *The Muslim World* 58 (1968), 65-71).

<sup>47</sup> James Waltz, "Historical Perspective on 'Early Missions' to Muslims: A Response to Allan Cutler," *The Muslim World* 61 (1971), 183. Waltz remains unconvinced, however, that related claims for missionary interests by Popes Gregory VII and Urban II can be sustained. According to him, the eleventh-century reform Popes "sought to reunite separated Christians and to defend present and reconquer former Christian territories, desiring the 'driving out' and 'extermination,' rather than the conversion, of Muslims there" (182). Waltz also rejects much of Cutler's interpretation of the alleged attempt at converting Kerbogha by Peter the Hermit. As he sees it, conversions do not prove the existence of "missions" and it cannot be demonstrated that the First Crusaders held the idea of converting Muslims, concluding that "the Cluniac conversion efforts of the 1070s appear isolated and unproductive of further such efforts prior to the thirteenth century" (185).



and Cutler's identification of Hugh of Cluny as the most likely source of the letters sent to Saragossa. Benjamin Kedar, in his well-known work on Western approaches to the Muslims, published in 1984, regards this correspondence as illustrative of the new balance of power between Europe and the world of Islam which began in the eleventh century and paved the way for a considerable number of Muslim conversions in the newly conquered territories of Spain and Sicily. This new power relationship "also emboldened some Catholic Europeans to consider the conversion of Muslims who had not yet come under Christian rule."<sup>48</sup> Kedar mentions Cutler's hypothesis regarding the identity of the 'monk of France' and the emissary of the first letter sent to Saragossa, but without committing himself. He also acknowledges Turki's remarks that the extant Arabic text of the 'Letter of the Monk of France' shows signs of Muslim redaction. He is convinced, nevertheless, of the historicity of the exchange in its entirety. In this sense, he points out something that I have mentioned above, namely, that the argument to the effect that the Devil used Muḥammad to trick the children of Ishmael was already known in al-Andalus.<sup>49</sup> The argument, Kedar believes, could have filtered north of the Pyrenees through French involvement in the early stages of the *reconquista*. His main argument in favor of the authenticity of the letter—which I find persuasive—is that "the repeated but oblique references to the actions of the *rāhib*'s messengers and their interpreter would have been out of place had the exchange been merely a Muslim literary exercise."<sup>50</sup> In effect, al-Bājī, in his reply, refers several times to the bearer of the first letter from the 'monk of France' and the two messengers who carried the second letter, mentioning their odd behavior and the contradictions they incurred.<sup>51</sup> Kedar also thinks that al-Bājī's condescending attitude toward the monk's ineptitude for rational thinking and their ignorance of earlier Muslim-Christian polemics further increase the verisimilitude of the exchange. All in all, he concludes, "this unprecedented incident points to the emergence of a new

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<sup>48</sup> Kedar, *Crusade*, 54.

<sup>49</sup> Kedar (*Crusade*, 55) refers to the account of the rise of "Mohomat" in the *Passion* of the martyr sisters Nunilo and Alodia, daughters of a Muslim father and a Christian mother, who were beheaded in Huesca in 851. For the passion narrative of these two martyrs, see Ann Christys, *Christians in Al-Andalus, 711-1000* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002), 68-79.

<sup>50</sup> Kedar, *Crusade*, 55.

<sup>51</sup> See §§9, 10, 15, 17, 38.

venturesome stance toward the world of Islam, a reflection on the intellectual plane of the Catholic European military counteroffensive.”<sup>52</sup>

Likewise, María Jesús Viguera, who translates some extracts of the correspondence into Spanish, appears to accept the historicity of the French missive and its association with the spirit of Cluny’s mission in Spain, noticing however that the episode was not signaled in the chronicles of the *taifa* of Saragossa.<sup>53</sup> Also convinced of the authenticity of the letters and of their connection with Cluniac involvement in Spain, is Hanna Kassis in his above-mentioned study.<sup>54</sup> As for the identity of the monk, although he mentions Abbot Hugh’s dispatch of missionaries to Spain, he seems to favor Dunlop’s “tentative though plausible association of the Christian epistle with Constantine Africanus (at least as interpreter), himself a convert from Islam and resident in Monte Cassino.”<sup>55</sup> Gaudeul considers that there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of this Christian letter, although it may have been slightly altered by the Muslim copyists. As for the identity of the ‘monk of France,’ he too thinks there are good reasons to believe that he was Abbot Hugh, noting that Cluny’s influence “had been spreading all over Europe and several of its monks had come from Spain” while “others had been sent to Spain to help in reforming the Spanish Church.” He suggests that the Latin original must have been translated at Cluny by an Arabic-speaking monk or perhaps later, by someone in Spain.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, and most recently, George Beech has also given some consideration to the correspondence between al-Bāji and the monk of France in his monograph on Islamic Saragossa during the eleventh century.<sup>57</sup> He is aware that, with the evidence at hand, no compelling answers can be given regarding the identity of the anonymous monk, if he ever existed, and the details of his relationship with al-Muqtadir ibn Hūd. Beech thinks, nevertheless, that what we do know about this Muslim ruler—his shifting political alliances and his friendly policies towards Mozarabs and Jews in his own *taifa*—makes it plausible to imagine that he might have authorized or even encouraged the exchange of letters and messengers with French Christians for strategic reasons:

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<sup>52</sup> Kedar, *Crusade*, 56.

<sup>53</sup> Viguera Molíns, *Aragón*, 195-197.

<sup>54</sup> Kassis, “Muslim Revival,” 91.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 44.

<sup>56</sup> Gaudeul, *Encounters*, 1:134-135.

<sup>57</sup> Beech, *The Brief Eminence*, 89-98.

He might have seen a friendship with a prominent French ecclesiastic as a step toward relations with southern French nobles, particularly if that ecclesiastic was, as has been hypothesized, a dignitary of Cluny, the monastic order which had extensive influence on Reconquista aristocracy whether Aragonese, Castilian, or French.<sup>58</sup>

## A Literary Fiction?

As we can see, the overall tendency has been to accept the authenticity of the exchange and to associate the Christian initiative with Cluny. To my knowledge, only two authors appear to have gone against the general consensus: Abdelmagid Turki and Maribel Fierro.<sup>59</sup> Turki begins by calling attention to the fact that the style of the Christian letter, as it has been preserved, does not conform to what one would expect from a Christian monk, even one knowledgeable about Islam and Arabic. As examples, he mentions the presence of the *basmala* (the formula “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate”) in the incipit of the letter or the invocation of blessings upon the Muslim Prophet and his family. Turki admits that these may be alterations introduced by the Muslim copyist. More difficult to explain, however, is the fact that the style of the letter does not allow for the assumption that it is a literary translation from a Latin original, such as the implicit reference to the ruler’s title—al-Muqtadir bi-llāh (literally, empowered by God)—in the initial paragraph, a play on words which only makes sense in Arabic:

To the loved friend, whom we hope will be a close intimate, who has been empowered (by God) over the empire of this world, the noble king, from the humblest of monks, who desires repentance and faith in Christ Jesus, the son of God, our Lord. (§1)

Turki also points out the numerous Qur’anic reminiscences in the allegedly Christian letter, which he meticulously indicates in the footnotes of his translation. All this suggests, in his view, that the Arabic version of the letter is the work of a Muslim or of a recent Muslim convert to Christianity, and not that of a “monk of France.” He also wonders why such a

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>59</sup> It is also the view, but without further discussion, of Amalia Zomeño in her entry “Jawāb al-qāḍī Abū l-Walīd al-Bājī ilā risālat rāhib Faransā ilā al-Muslimīn,” *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*. General Editor David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2011), available online at: [http://0-www.brillonline.nl.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=CMR\\_COM-23362](http://0-www.brillonline.nl.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=CMR_COM-23362).

monk of high ecclesiastical rank would have chosen to remain anonymous, all the more after having already received a reply from the Muslim ruler to his first letter.

Turki considers next the possibility that the Christian letter could have been a fictitious text composed in Arabic for the sake of the polemic, but based nonetheless on authentic Christian anti-Muslim material circulating at the time. It is not difficult to imagine, he says, that Christians might have launched an ideological offensive on the eve of the conquest of Toledo aimed at the demoralization and the “spiritual conquest” of the Muslims as a prelude to their military conquest. Likewise, it is not difficult to imagine that Muslim scholars like al-Bājī would have responded to these ideological attacks. Yet, adds Turki, we do not need to suppose that the Christian “ideological offensive” took place in reality. Following the procedures of a well-known genre of polemical literature, al-Bājī could have perfectly well composed the ‘Letter of the Monk of France’ as an excuse to deploy his attack on Christianity.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Two Iberian examples of Muslim anti-Christian epistolary exchanges of this genre are Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Šamad al-Khazraǧī’s (d. 1187) *Maqāmi’ al-šulbān* (Mallets for [Hammering] the Crosses), written in the mid-1140s in refutation of a letter by an anonymous Mozarabic priest from Toledo, and Aḥmad ibn ‘Umar ibn Ibrāhīm al-Anṣarī al-Qurṭubī’s (d. 1258) *al-l’lām bi-mā fi dīn al-naṣāra min al-fasād wa’l-awḥām* (Information about the Corruption and Delusions of the Christian Religion), also written in response to a Christian tract supposedly sent from Toledo to Cordoba. On these works, see Thomas E. Burman, *Religious Polemic and the Intellectual History of the Mozarabs, c. 1050-1200* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 62-84; and Abdelilah Ljamai, *Ibn Ḥazm et la polémique islamo-chrétienne dans l’histoire de l’Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 145-168. Still, that the epistolary exchange became a genre of interreligious polemic does not preclude the historicity of some of these exchanges. See in this respect Sidney Griffith’s remarks on a genre of medieval Christian apologetics which also raises questions about history and literary form, a genre which he calls “the monk in the emir’s *majlis*” (with its Muslim counterpart: “the *mutakallim* in the emperor’s *majlis*”). After analyzing several examples, he concludes that, in the end, “nothing much can usefully be said in general about these matters. Each account must be considered individually” (Sidney H. Griffith, “The Monk in the Emir’s *Majlis*: Reflections on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Medieval Period,” in *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, eds H. Lazarus-Yafeh et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 62. While particular accounts lack all historical verisimilitude, it is not inherently improbable to imagine some historical basis behind other accounts, allowing for embellishments and later accretions for ideological purposes. The intertwining of history and literature in all of these texts is such that, “it seems highly unlikely that they shall ever be successfully disentangled” (ibid., 65).

Fierro, for her part, finds Cutler's arguments in favor of Cluny as the origin of the Christian letters, Abbot Hugh and Gregory VII as their intellectual authors, and Anastasius as the bearer of the first missive, "confused, unsubstantiated and unconvincing."<sup>61</sup> She inclines toward accepting Turki's suggestion that al-Bājī might have composed both the Christian letter and the response to it. This fabricated correspondence would reflect, nevertheless, the reality of the time, namely, the fact that Christian territorial advance was also felt as a religious threat, provoking in turn a Muslim reaction in the form of an apology for Islam and an attack on Christianity. She ends her analysis with the suggestion that al-Bājī might have written his refutation in reply to the *Apology of al-Kindī*, the best known and most influential medieval Christian polemic against Islam, in both East and West, which al-Bājī could have known either during his stay in the East or in al-Andalus itself.<sup>62</sup>

In my opinion, neither Turki nor Fierro give enough consideration to the main argument that Kedar puts forward in favor of the authenticity of the exchange, that is, the repeated references in al-Bājī's response to the behavior of the monk's messengers and their interpreter, something that would seem superfluous had the letter been merely a fictitious pretext. More conclusively, at a certain point in his response, the Andalusian scholar expresses astonishment that his interlocutor seems to be claiming something that no one of his coreligionists holds, namely, that only faith in the Son, and not in the Father, is necessary for salvation:

We have seen that in your letter you differ from all the followers of your religion, for there is no one among the sects of the Christians who says that one need have faith only in Christ. Rather, for you it is faith in the Father that is necessary, and you do not ascribe humanity to the Father. Only the Son is so considered, and anyone who

<sup>61</sup> Fierro, "La religión," 475.

<sup>62</sup> On this work, whose authorship and the exact dating of its writing are still disputed, see Laura Bottini, "Risālat 'Abdallāh ibn Ismā'il al-Hāshimī ilā 'Abd al-Masīḥ ibn Ishāq al-Kindī yad'ūhu bihā ilā l-Islām wa-risālat al-Kindī ilā l-Hāshimī yaruddu bihā 'alayhi wa-yad'ūhu ilā l-Naṣrāniyya," *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*. General Editor David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2011), available online at: [http://0-www.brillonline.nl.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=CMR\\_COM-23659](http://0-www.brillonline.nl.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=CMR_COM-23659). Al-Kindī's apology was translated into Latin in Toledo in the early 1140s and included in the *Collectio toledana* commissioned by Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny from 1122 until his death in 1156. For the influence of this and other Oriental polemical works against Islam on the Mozarabs of Spain, see Burman, *Religious*, 95-124, and Urvoy, "La pensée."

believes in the Son, disbelieves in the Father. Previously, you had said in your letter that Christ is the son of God, and this contradicts your statement that faith is necessary only in Christ, who is the Son. (§16)

Supposing that al-Bāḥī composed the ‘Christian’ missive in order to refute it, it is very unlikely that he would have included an argument that he knew was not representative of Christianity, thus weakening the forcefulness of his refutation. On the contrary, it seems to me that the passage just quoted shows that, in this precise question, al-Bāḥī and the Christian author are talking at cross purposes, which also argues against the former being the author of the entire exchange. The words of the monk that give rise to al-Bāḥī’s astonishment are the following:

They [i.e., the brethren carrying the letter to the Lord of Saragossa] will explain in your presence the truth of the religion of the Christians and confirm in you the knowledge of Christ, our Lord, than whom we need faith in no other and in whom alone we look for salvation. He is God, who was veiled Himself in our human form to deliver us by His innocent blood from the destruction of the Devil. (§2)

In fact, the paragraph expresses the conviction that Christ alone is mediator of salvation and that explicit faith in him as Son of God is requisite for obtaining eternal life. Here, faith in the Son does not entail disbelief in the Father, as the Andalusian scholar interprets, but rather presupposes it. The author of the ‘Letter of the Monk of France’ begins by acknowledging that the Almighty has enlightened the ruler’s heart bringing him to faith in God. This preparatory work of God must now be brought to completion by accepting Christ’s divine identity and his work of redemption:

And in truth the Almighty, who chose His friends before the creation of the world and did not foreordain their perdition, has enlightened your heart and given you a foretaste of faith in God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Forgiving, who preserves you and guides you to knowledge of Himself. It is impossible for us to delay doing all that we can to see this blessing brought to completion, with God’s good help, so that you may take your place among us in his Kingdom, if that be your choice. To this end, we have sent you some of our brethren to bring you the divine Word, as God helps them thereto. (§§1-2)

Another theme that recurs in the epistolary exchange is that of the Kingdom of God. It appears already in the first paragraph of the Christian letter, after the reference to “the noble king” and his “high position in the world,” which leads the author to invite his interlocutor “to prefer the everlasting Kingdom to that which ends and passes away” (§1), a Kingdom

in which Christians already share. This “Kingdom of God Most High,” which the author associates with the mystery of the Incarnation, is said to be

greater and more glorious than that which human understanding could take in or attain to by theological reasoning. Yet it is one of the signs of Almighty God that He swells the breasts of the sons of Adam and causes the spirit of knowledge to enter their hearts, that faith may strike root in their souls. (§3)

The monk concludes by exhorting the king to yield to God’s workings in his heart and receive “the word of eternal salvation which we offer you” (§5). The theme of the Kingdom of God is picked up by al-Bāḥī who makes it the subject matter of important sections of his reply (§§14-15; 17). Among other things, he accuses his Christian correspondent of making a wrong use of this and other expressions, “because you do not know what they imply” (§14; see also §37). Again, one has the impression that the two are talking at cross-purposes. Whereas the monk connects the Kingdom of God with the earthly mission of the Incarnate Word, a mission that has taken place “at the end of the age, to change time and make it new” (§3), the Andalusian scholar replies from an entirely Islamic understanding of the Kingdom of God as the realm of God’s majesty and sovereignty in which nobody can share. This impression further reinforces the view in favor of the authenticity of the correspondence.

All in all, we have good reasons to believe that the exchange was not a literary fiction and that at least two missionary letters, the first of which is no longer extant, arrived at the court of Saragossa in the 1070s, inviting its Muslim ruler to convert to Christianity.

What else can we say about the contents of this correspondence?

### **A Missionary Letter from France**

A first noticeable characteristic of the ‘Letter of the Monk of France’ is its overall friendly tone and the absence of any reference, explicit or otherwise, to the armed conflicts that were increasingly defining the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Iberia during the second half of the eleventh century.<sup>63</sup> The monk assures his interlocutor of his sincerity “in

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<sup>63</sup> For Gaudéul (*Encounters*, 1:136), contrary to the view of Cutler and others, this is an indication that this letter and the so-called ‘pre-crusades’—that is, the military expeditions against Iberian Muslims that French and Spanish noblemen carried out during this

seeking to serve your interests and eager to devote ourselves to you,” asking him to rejoice at the prayers and alms “freely offered by our brethren in this country on your account, though not one of them has so much as seen you, and each does so gratuitously from a desire that God may guide you to his favor” (§5).

In the middle paragraphs of the letter, the Incarnation is presented as the culmination of God’s plan to restore the “good order which was lost to the world in Adam” (§3). The author goes on to affirm that the Incarnation is not something peculiar to Christian scriptures, but was already the proclaimed goal of the whole history of salvation, and that other sacred books—“the books of the Jews and of those who oppose us” (§3)—give witness to it. Next, the letter ascribes a satanic origin to Islam. The Devil, out to corrupt the Christian religion, and unable to effectively oppose the success of the Apostles and the Christian martyrs in their battle against idolatry, “deceived the children of Ishmael regarding the Prophet, whose mission they acknowledged, and thereby drew away many souls to the punishment of Hell” (§4). The Muslim king is then invited to reflect upon his situation and, with the single-minded desire to save his soul on the Day of Judgment, accept the monk’s invitation to receive eternal salvation in Christ, “who has done away with death and conquered Satan” and is able “to save you from the wiles of the Devil, in which till now you have been ensnared” (§6).

Finally, as already noted, the author of the letter stresses that the truth of the Christian religion is not demonstrable by purely theological reasoning (*ilm al-kalām*); rather, what is needed is a spiritual experience, an opening to God’s grace at work in our hearts.

### **The Muslim Response**

The preamble of the work (§§8-10) recalls the various communications sent to the Muslim ruler. Notwithstanding the absurdities contained therein and the monk’s negative references to the Muslim Prophet, in consideration of his offer of friendship and respect for the high position he enjoys among his coreligionists, al-Bāji says that his tone will be mild and

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period—did not come from the same quarters. In his view, Pope Gregory VII and Abbot Hugh of Cluny, whom he takes to be the inspirers of the ‘Letter from the Monk of France,’ cannot be thus associated with the pre-crusades.



friendly, and that he will clarify things “in the discursive, epistolary style, not by the method of demonstrations and proofs” (§10).

In the paragraphs that follow, the author offers us an almost complete sample of the main arguments of classical Muslim anti-Christian polemics, in addition to responding to specific issues raised by the ‘Letter of the Monk of France,’ such as the question of the Kingdom of God and who shares in it. These arguments are the following: Jesus cannot be the Son of God, since he is a contingent being “not exempt from the proofs of createness” (§11); Jesus is not superior to Adam, who had “neither father nor mother” (§11); his miracles are not greater than those of other prophets, for whom Christians do not claim divinity (§12); Muḥammad’s exalted religion abrogates all other religions (§13); the Qur’ān contains “the divine Word in truth,” protected from any alteration or change (§14); Christians disagree among themselves in regard to their religion (§15); they neglect study and naively accept views and stories that are untrue (§16); the true religion, which is the constant message of the prophets, is monotheism as Islam understands it (§17); Moses and Muḥammad were more successful in terms of followers than Jesus, and this without having to sacrifice themselves (§20); Christians say that Jesus gave his blood for the salvation of men, yet God cannot be defeated nor can he die (§22); Jesus cannot be both son of God and son of David at the same time (§24); the Incarnation is not accepted by anybody except the Christians (§25); Jesus’ announcement of Muḥammad has been expunged from the Gospels (§26); God is more powerful than the Devil and cannot be tempted by him (§27-28); Muḥammad is the seal of the prophets, sent from the best of nations; he performed clear miracles and told of hidden things (§29); the Qur’ān represents the greatest prophetic miracle ever performed, to be attested to by all generations (§31); Muḥammad’s unrivalled moral uprightness and holiness cannot be denied (§§32-35).

In his conclusion (§§36-39), al-Bāḥi exhorts his interlocutor not to be deceived by the good fortune and power he derives from his position, but rather to accept the knowledge about the true meaning of religion that God is offering him through his intermediary. Discussing religion without knowledge is equivalent to telling lies against God and it carries terrible consequences in the afterlife. The monk is responsible for his soul and the souls of those who have been misled by him. Al-Bāḥi concludes asking God “to guide you [the monk] and guide through you those who are with you, that you may gain the most excellent of them and be a means of their salvation” (§39).

Anyone who is familiar with the history of Muslim anti-Christian polemics will easily recognize in al-Bāḥī's response the main themes of this tradition, as we find them in works composed at different times across the Islamic world. Beyond this, however, we need to ask what the reply tells us about al-Bāḥī's own views of Christians and Christianity, and how they compared with his views of Muslims and Islam.

### A Theologian's Confidence

A first important element that emerges is al-Bāḥī's overt confidence in his intellectual superiority over his Christian interlocutor, and, by extension, of the Muslim community over its Christian counterpart. By this I mean not simply the all-too-typical accusation that Christianity is an irrational religion in which 'three are one' and 'God becomes man.' That is also present in al-Bāḥī's response (§§9, 11-12, 23-24), but there is more than that.<sup>64</sup> We recall that during his stay in the East, al-Bāḥī had acquainted himself with the science of *kalām*, eventually becoming one of the channels of its introduction in the Muslim West. His response to the 'monk of France' reveals how much value he placed on this science and the consequences of not finding anything comparable to it among Christians. Al-Bāḥī insists several times that his interlocutor uses expressions such as "Kingdom of God," the "present world" or the "afterlife" wrongly and without really knowing what they mean. He wishes that he the monk could "come join us, so that you may hear discussion properly so called on the meanings of these expressions, and that we may establish their several senses and use according to their systematic classification" (§14). Not only were the monk's missives intellectually flawed, but the messengers who came bearing them spoke "with incompetence, laxness, stupidity and feeble reasoning, showing perplexity, hesitation and confusion in their claims and arguments" (§15). Al-Bāḥī goes on to boast that "we know your law and are aware of the disagreement of your doctors in regard to your religion... of which, if we had shown them [the messengers] even a small part [of what we know], we should have stupefied and dazzled them" (§15). Again, the "contradiction, dislocation and absurdity" that appear in the

<sup>64</sup> For a contemporary negative characterization of Christians which includes, inter alia, the charge that Christians are stupid and irrational, see Theodore Pulcini, *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse: Ibn Ḥazm on Jewish and Christian Scriptures* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 134-142.

letter confirm, says al-Bāji, what he already knows about Christians, namely, their “lack of knowledge, unfamiliarity with the aims of dialectic and neglect of study and discussion” (§16). Once more, he reiterates his invitation to the monk to

come to us, that we may instruct you and perhaps make you understand the certainty and accuracy of theology, its excellence and superiority, the systematic classification of the proofs and what they imply, and the rules governing demonstrations and what they result in, to remove all foolishness from your soul and to cleanse your heart from what soils it, so that you may see truth plain and evident and religion strong and clear. (§17)

In short, in the competing market of truth-claims, where every religion and sect is convinced of its own veracity, it is only theological reasoning—something notably lacking among Christians—that can “exalt and confirm the truth and diminish and efface falsehood” (§18). Such is al-Bāji’s sense of theological superiority that he can say confidently that, if only his Christian interlocutor would accept to meet with him, he would explain to him what he ignores about the Incarnation, what earlier Christians said about it and what Muslims object to in its regard (§25).

### **Moderation in Tone**

Another interesting feature of al-Bāji’s reply is the generally mild tone of the invective, especially when compared with the sharply polemical approach of his contemporary and theological rival Ibn Ḥazm.<sup>65</sup> Was it the result of al-Bāji’s own natural character? Was it perhaps his desire to correspond to the amicable approach shown by the ‘monk of France’? Or was it a calculated attempt at remaining nonchalant in a situation that would normally have tended to awaken passionate attacks? It is difficult to pinpoint a single reason. The fact is that al-Bāji’s tone remains fairly moderate, even after acknowledging that the monk’s depiction of the Muslim Prophet has angered him. It should be noted, however, that this depiction was rather restrained, especially when compared with other polemic portrayals of Muḥammad that were circulating at the time and that were to

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-54.

prevail in later centuries.<sup>66</sup> The ‘Letter of the Monk of France’ limits itself to stating that the Devil used Muḥammad to delude the children of Ishmael, who otherwise are said to be “great nations” (§4). Muḥammad’s personal participation in this plot is left unqualified, and the reader is free to conclude that he was also deceived; but obviously, even this last possibility was totally unacceptable for al-Bāḥī, who sees in Muḥammad the seal and perfection of prophethood (§29). Yet, he refuses to belittle himself by accepting the bait and succumbing to the provocation: “We abstain from opposing you when you speak ill of the noble Apostles and honored Prophets, on whom be peace, a point we disapproved of in your discourse and which angers us in your letter” (§10).

Gaudeul detects more hostility and contempt in al-Bāḥī’s composition than I personally am able to perceive. He calls attention to the fact that the Christian is constantly taxed with stupidity, ignorance and absent-mindedness, and theorizes that the anger displayed by the Muslim author “probably comes from the way the monk spoke of Muhammad, and still more from the Christian’s boldness in attempting to convert Muslims, people who surpass him in their faith and culture.”<sup>67</sup> Perhaps. I still believe that the general tenor of al-Bāḥī’s reply is moderate, even if he repeats, as already noted, the typical Muslim depiction of Christians as irrational beings.

### Islam, the True Religion

Another interesting point that emerges from al-Bāḥī’s reply is that politeness and moderation in tone do not imply any relativization of the absoluteness of Islam. To the monk’s explicit invitation to convert to Christianity, al-Bāḥī responds with an equally explicit invitation to his correspondent to repent and return to the true religion (§§9, 14, 21).<sup>68</sup> Perhaps one of clearest passages in this sense is the following one:

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<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, John V. Tolan, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims Through European Eyes in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008), 19-34. According to Tolan, the polemical Christian biographers of Muḥammad denigrate Islam by portraying him as a scoundrel: “He is variously shown to be a pervert, drunkard, epileptic, magician, heretic, swindler, murderer, Machiavellian political schemer, and intimate of Satan” (19). See also Christys, *Christians*, 62-68.

<sup>67</sup> Gaudeul, *Encounters*, 1:138.

<sup>68</sup> As Gaudeul remarks (*ibid.*), the theme of “returning” here does not refer to the return of the convert to his former Islamic faith, but rather the return of Christianity to the true Abrahamic religion.

We hope that God, the Exalted, will save you by Islam from Hell and remove you therefrom by your passing over to the religion of Muḥammad, on whom be peace. Truly, God, the Exalted, has enlightened the hearts of the members of the Muslim community by means of Islam, honored us thereby and ennobled us in following Muḥammad—may God bless him and give him peace. [...] We must do what we can to advise you, to remain close to you and to strive that you may become one with the community of this honored nation and the people of this exalted religion, which abrogates all other religions and rules over all sects, so that thus you may gain favor with the Lord of the worlds, escape his wrath, receive the reward of the Last Day, be free from shame and happy in the present world by membership in our community, becoming one with us. (§13)

This passage also shows al-Bāḥī's theological acumen in picking up and responding to the monk's suggestion that God has enlightened the heart of the Muslim ruler, guiding him to faith in spite of his belonging to a community that follows a false prophet. Al-Bāḥī retorts that God enlightens the hearts of the members of the Muslim community by Islam, through their following of Muḥammad, in whom prophecy has been perfected. As a matter of fact, al-Bāḥī's earlier statement that he would not respond in kind to the monk's speaking ill of the prophets was something of a rhetorical device, in the sense that his Muslim faith obliged him to respect all the biblical prophets. As I see it, his real rejoinder to the monk's suggestion that Muḥammad was part of a satanic plot is found in the last important thematic section of the work (§§29-35), which contains a laudatory presentation of the Muslim Prophet: his universal mission, the miraculous signs that he performed, the sending down of the Qur'ān, the institution of a divine Law "which God chose for him as the best of laws" (§31), his personal dedication to God's service and his perfect embodiment of the divine Law that he proclaimed, his detachment from the riches of this world, and his refusal to claim for himself privileges that belong to God alone.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Scholars tend to emphasize the importance of the works they discuss. It would certainly be an exaggeration to claim that the correspondence between the 'monk of France' and al-Bāḥī provides us with information about eleventh-century Iberia that would have been impossible to obtain otherwise. Had the exchange not survived, our knowledge of the period would still be fundamentally the same. That said, however, we can be grateful that a copy of this epistolary exchange has reached us. For it helps

us to understand better the momentous character of the events that took place in the second half of this century, when the power balance between Muslims and Christians in Iberia began to shift as a result of the political disintegration of al-Andalus and the expansion of the northern Christian kingdoms. As Fierro points out, Christian territorial advance was also felt as a religious threat, the great evil of apostasy. This situation provoked in turn a conservative reaction on the part of the Andalusian *ulāmā*, who called upon their fellow Muslims to hold fast to their faith, while seeking to purify it and to raise the moral standards. The feeling of crisis naturally had an impact on Muslim-Christian relations in al-Andalus. Thus, as Mikel de Epalza remarks, it is no coincidence that this period saw the appearance of the first Muslim anti-Christian polemics in the West from the quills of Ibn Ḥazm and al-Bāji.<sup>69</sup> In an effort to understand the role played by anti-Christian polemics in medieval Islam, Abdelmajid Charfi has identified six primary functions of these polemics, two of which apply particularly to al-Bāji's response: polemics as a response to social antagonism and polemics as a defense and glorification of Islamic civilization.<sup>70</sup> In effect, we have seen how al-Bāji boasts confidently of the excellence and superiority of the Islamic way of life, which, based on the best of divine laws, is "the most perspicuous in wisdom, has the clearest prescriptions and is the most perfectly constituted" (§31). We also noted his profound conviction of the intellectual superiority of his community, thanks to the cultivation of theological reasoning. Such self-assurance, however, should not make us blind to the fact that, contrary to appearances, polemics, as Epalza observes, is always defensive.<sup>71</sup>

As mentioned by Turki and others, it is perfectly conceivable that the 'Letter of the Monk of France' is a fiction created by al-Bāji for the purpose

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<sup>69</sup> Epalza, "Notes," 100-102. See also, by the same author, *Fray Anselm Turmeda (ʿAbdallāh al-Tarḡumān) y su polémica islamo-cristiana: edición, traducción y estudio de la Tuhfa*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Hiperión, 1994), 67-68.

<sup>70</sup> Abdelmajid Charfi, "Polémiques islamo-chrétiennes à l'époque médiévale," in *Scholarly Approaches to Religion, Interreligious Perceptions and Islam*, ed. J. Waardenburg (Bern: Peter Lang, 1995), 264-273. The other four functions of Muslim anti-Christian polemics are: to redress the demographic imbalance in favor of the Christians by seeking to convert them to Islam; the integration of neophytes, thus avoiding the risk of syncretism; as an exercise of theological elaboration; and the search for the biblical origins of Islam, by which Charfi means the biblical predictions of Muḥammad and the question of his miracles.

<sup>71</sup> Epalza, *Fray Anselm*, 67.

of his apologetic project. I am inclined to think, however, that the letter is authentic and I have already given my reasons for thinking so. If such be the case, the most likely guess as to the identity of the high-ranking ecclesiastic who refers to himself modestly as “the humblest of monks” is that he is a bishop or an abbot related to Cluny, perhaps Abbot Hugh himself. If authentic, the ‘Letter of the Monk of France’ also tells us something important about the second half of the eleventh century, namely, that this period saw the first Western Christian attempts at a mission directed to the Muslims. That this should happen precisely at this time is no coincidence either. In effect, as Kedar argues, it is the new balance of power with the world of Islam in decline and Christian encroachment on Muslim territory that explain the missionary letters sent to the Muslim court of Saragossa and other missionary initiatives such as Anastasius of Cluny’s journey to Spain in the mid-1070s, even if these efforts were tentative and apparently unproductive.<sup>72</sup> The precise connection between these missionary initiatives and the so-called ‘pre-crusades’ still remains to be elucidated. We have seen that, for Cutler, sword and pen were two sides of the same coin, so to say, complementary efforts at facilitating the advance of the Spanish *reconquista*. Gaudeul, however, sees a fundamental incompatibility between these two approaches and thinks that they could not come from the same persons. I tend to side with Gaudeul on this issue, although I am much aware, thanks to Herbert Cowdrey’s study of Pope Gregory VII, that apparent paradoxes were not altogether uncommon during these centuries of conflict and coexistence.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Kedar, *Crusade*, 54. According to Kedar, the main deterrent to Christian mission to Muslims in the West was the early awareness of the Muslim prohibition of proselytism against their religion and the consequent risk of death for both apostates and missionaries. This explains the otherwise puzzling fact that Western Christians abstained for centuries from any organized attempt at evangelizing Muslims while such missionary activities abounded in the northern and eastern European fronts.

<sup>73</sup> Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory*, 489-494.

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